

## **How Do I Pick a Health Care Decision-maker?**

### **Imagine...**

*You have been admitted to the hospital with a serious health event and cannot speak for yourself.*

*You have not had a discussion with your family about how you want to be treated and cared for.*

*The doctor caring for you doesn't know you so he will seek out your family to make decisions.*

*Are there family members that you hope the doctor speaks with? What about family members you hope the doctor won't speak with?*

*Does your family know how you would like to be cared for and the things that you value about life? Would they choose what you would choose?*

### **What is a health care decision maker?**

As long as you are able to make decisions, YOU ARE IN CONTROL OF WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU! But if you are not able to make health care decisions, your decision-maker steps up to do that for you.

A health care decision-maker is a person chosen by you and given the legal authority to make medical decisions when you are unable to do so. Other terms used to describe the health care decision-maker are:

- Health Care Agent or Agent
- Health Care Proxy or Proxy
- Medical Power of Attorney
- Power of attorney for Health Care or "POA"

The legal document that gives the authority to make medical decisions is called a "durable power of attorney for health care."

### **What does the health care decision maker do?**

The main task of your agent is to see that your health care wishes are followed. Your agent does this by:

- Knowing your health care wishes. Please be sure that you have informed your agent of your wishes by reviewing the *Five Wishes* tool with the agent. The more your agent understands what you want, the better your wishes will be followed.
- The members of the health care team need to know who is making decisions. The agent must have 1 or more copies of your *Five Wishes* to give to the doctor, hospital, or clinic – anywhere that you might receive health care.

- Your agent will need to ask questions of the doctors and nurses so they stay informed of your condition. This will better prepare them for making choices in line with your wishes.
- Your agent must be able to be both courteous and firm. Doctors, nurses, and even family members may push certain treatments that are not in line with your health care choices. Your agent must keep reminding them of your wishes. Be courteous but also be firm.

### **When choosing a decision-maker or agent, what should I look for?**

There are several questions you want to ask when choosing a health care agent:

- Is the person willing to accept the responsibility of serving as your agent?
- Is the person able to make difficult decisions under stress?
- Does the person know your values and wishes?
- Will the person be able to make decisions in line with your values and wishes?
- Do YOU have confidence in this person's ability to follow your wishes and to deal with tough issues in a crisis?

### **Does my decision-maker or agent have to be a family member?**

Your decision-maker for health care does NOT have to be a family member. You need to choose a decision-maker that meets the characteristics mentioned above. Some people choose their pastor; others choose a close friend.

However, it is still important to discuss your wishes with your family members and your reasoning for choosing someone outside your family. Informing your family of your health care agent choice is VERY important to preventing family squabbles in the future.